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At the End of the Street

Up the street, Maggie walked: summer, winter, autumn, spring. Over the mound of weedy grass that led from the white curb to the first swaying trees. The trail led through some brush and down a path on a tree-dotted hill. Then there was a wide, pan-shaped meadow of dirt and grass and little treeplings that held out hopping, chirping, buzzing, golden days.

Alone or with friends she would go; drawn by some magical string that connected her navel to “the woods”. She loved the smells and sights and touch of those fifty-odd acres of freedom. Loved her little, suburban wilderness on the outskirts of Cincinnati. These woods were as close as she could get, before she could drive, to the forests and glens and rivers of her daydreams.

Along the paths to the right or the left – or straight-ahead, down the slope to the little stream – Maggie would plunge. Was it a stream? Or was it a creek? Certainly not a river – though she could pretend if a river was needed.

More like a combination of a natural creek and their housing development drainage for who knows what! It didn't always smell nice. Sometimes in the too hot summers, there was a definite undertone of sewage to the whole adventure. But that could be ignored.

In winter she would plow through the cold and snow, with friend Janet in tow, and spend an afternoon with Big Bertha - a large, smooth branch made into a staff. This staff transformed into a spear or icebreaker, as the mood took them. And, somehow, they found Big John: a just-right flat stone for smashing things in the creek or for carrying over to a little campfire for a sit and some giggling.

They would break the ice and ooh and ahh over the beauty of crystals and water and stones and little creatures that should not have been alive in a place so cold. They would build a fire on a stony portion of the creek bed – and smoke cigarettes and eat little snacky things pulled from their pockets. And laugh.

There was so much laughter ringing through those woods of Maggie's childhood. So many times, with friends or alone in the golden sun, experimenting with another kind of grass before Jesus led her away from Hippville. Long hours spent wondering or writing great books in her mind, she would stroll over the soft dust of the paths – unaware of time, or place, or person.

So many friends came there with her. In her mind and by her side!

Boys that were like brothers helped her build forts, run races, climb trees, and dream. One of these males she fell in and out of love with for the best five of her teen years. These were friendly boys, who took the place of her only, older brother, who had packed off to college, then moved far away. The woods sealed these adopted brothers in her heart forever. They guarded her during her wild flings outside the woods.

Remember the Hole? Of course, you don't! Let me explain.

At the top of the woods, right behind Joel and Danny's house, there was a hole. With pick and shovel and boards and nails and tin and whatnot – they expanded the hole and covered it with a roof. It was like a basement with no house; a clubhouse that housed a club of giddy children - on the verge of being unchildren. Here again with the smoking of pot and the bumming of cigarettes and the telling of ridiculous jokes and gigantic dreams; scheming, teenage girls and swaggering, sweaty teenage boys.

The woods at the end of the street sheltered them all. And she ran there to find herself when she knew she was lost. She ran in the hope that life was not as dull as it appeared during school and while watching TV.

Sometimes she would sit in a nest of clover or leaves and be so silent that others would not notice her as they trekked through the woods on their way to growing up themselves. Maybe it would be some of her boy/brothers – or a couple holding hands and looking for a place where they could hold more, much more. Or just another single soul – out for a walk and a fantasy before doing homework or going to batting practice. And she would wonder what *they* were talking about or thinking. She would wonder if they felt the magic of these trees as she did. Did they come here by choice, or were they,

too, pulled up by the roots of their belly and reeled into the grove for reasons beyond human reason?

It was a good place to grow up. For that is what she did there. So much more than in her bedroom or arguing with her parents in the kitchen or humming along with her friends to the noisy music of puberty. Here she decided to be extravagant. Here she grew in the micro-increments of the soul, not like in school, where you were graded on a curve. Here she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that she would serve Love like a slave...no, like a bondservant of an older time— for she was willing. More than willing, eager – for this service is why she lived. Here, she knew that she would make it. Here she decided – on purpose – to never give up on high ideals and her dreamiest dreams.

The woods at the end of the street held Maggie's secrets. Not all of them – but the best ones. The woods lifted her prayers to a God she would not know until she was ready to climb out of that tree-place and walk away for good. The woods heard her cry. Knew her tears and why they fell. The little creek took those salty splashes in and moved them along to the place where their message would be heard. Heard and responded to by White Light and Hope. By Salvation – though she could never have named Him then.

There were many months and weeks and moments she walked outside the trees. And in her youth, she gave in to wildness and anger. And drugs. The hold was on her soul, around her soul's throat like strong, stubborn fingers. The drugs that first captured her were prescribed by a doctor to lose weight. And then, when using ten of these a day she could not sleep, he gave her other pills to sleep. And when womanhood was painful, he gave her little, pink capsules to make the pain go away. Soon, there was so much pain. Too much pain.

The pain of fighting with her mother over and over and over and even the woods could not make her stop. The anger of going up and crashing down, made her pour out her frustration and confusion on the only woman who completely loved her. Maggie wondered if her mom ever went to the woods.

The pain of love found and too soon lost. First love it was. Wonder, it was. Obsession? Oh, yes it was. And then he was gone. For no reason that she could understand, though parents talked behind closed doors after her father found her and First Love on that dock on that starry night. She turned on herself in pain and ran wild. Ran wilder. And when she could not find herself more than a moment or two at a time...could no longer find herself outside of the lie of the drugs...then real pain came.

At the end of the street, in the little, yellow woods, she wept the torrent of grief and fear, and longing that took over when they told her that her dad had cancer.

They told her that he had cancer in his esophagus and that they were going to cut it out and then there would be "treatments" and then he would be well. OK. How about some pizza? Did she want to drive the lusty, red convertible down to the Pizza Hut and pick it up and bring it back for the three of them to chew on like cardboard or leather while the agony backed up in their throats and made breathing a real effort? Sure! Into the smooth, white interior she slid and turned on the key to hear that purr she loved to hear. Down the street, she drove, turning right at the foot of the hill and right into the back end of a car belonging to some nice, middle-aged guy on his way to Wherever. And he walks back to the snazzy, red Grand Sport and asks the little blond girl if she is OK and is greeted by a deluge. Poor guy! Standing in the middle of a Friday night there on a midwestern street as this youngster sobs that she is sorry, but her dad has cancer...

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Maggie doesn't remember who delivered dinner or if the pizza was ever retrieved...but she knows where her steps led when dad drove the bumped car back into the driveway and gave her a hug and said – it will be all right, my little Shar. Her steps said – I will be back in a few – just going for a little walk...need a little smoke - O God! did she say that to her daddy who had cancer? Her steps blurred into a jog, into a run, into the woods at the top of the street. Down through the bush, down on the path, down the bank to her favorite smooth tree that grew sideways out of the cliff and over the water. There she wept. For hours and hours, she wept. Alone and not alone at all. And she grew up, just a fraction more.

Up she grew and the woods watched with sweet understanding as she fought through the next wild and frightening years. She and the woods - two lovers who were desperately trying to hold onto each other. Yet death loosened that grip - one finger at a time... and misplaced her. The trees misplaced her – but they never lost her. And for everyone looking on she seemed mighty self-centered and hardheaded and crazy and insensitive to her dad and to her grieving mom. But the woods understood. Understood that she was dying too – a version of her was dying, just as he was dying. A girl who was sheltered by her dad passed away as they wrapped their swaying arms around her.

She snuck away after the funeral. She snuck away after going back to a new college that fall. She snuck away less and less in the flesh – and more and more in her mind; a mind that was wounded but beginning to believe. She was beginning to see better, know better, and act better.

After those last two years Maggie stood up and walked out of the woods: out of the woods after his funeral; out of the woods after the lecture that she was to stand by her mom; out of the woods into a new world of faith and healing and love. Out of the woods she marched – straight into her life. She marched up the aisle and into True Love’s heart. She marched away with the boy who became the man who aged along beside her. And the woods gave the bride away. At last – they gave her away.

In the light of the One who made the light of that wood, she attempted to love her soul mate, to love her daughters, to love herself at long last...and to grow. It was not an easy path. She was not an easy soul. They fought and prayed and believed and sinned. They did right and did much wrong. Maggie prayed that her daughters would find the Light themselves, for she knew she was not a great example of that Life.

But the hope she had found in the woods so long ago would not let her go. The wonder of life, of redemption, of purpose and promise – found in the greenery growing up to her nose and laying in the sunshine of a sixteen-year-olds afternoon meditation – would not let her go. Every Beatle tune she hummed, and every gospel song agree, all you need is love.

So how could she give up when she wrestled years later with different colored pills again; or gained too much weight; or despaired of happiness in marriage...of any happiness at all? How could she stop believing in the love that hung on a tree? How could she stop believing in that prayer on the hill in the wood at sixteen when she was befuddled by smoke as she began...and o, so clear-headed when the prayer ended?

Holding on to those hands, pierced and loving and strong – the marriage was restored in true love and depth. The body aged – but regained honesty not defined by pills.

The trials of her daughters became their trials, as they should be, and not her guilt and torn heart. And the grandson that first brought tears and agony, became the light of their eyes as they lived life more fully because he had joined them.

Maggie found that life is sweet – maybe that is why she is a diabetic! Too much life.

She has held that glowing, tree-lined path in her heart all these years – the path to a splashing little creek where she sat and thought and eventually, prayed. She does not have to go far to relax – not even to the end of the street. She has only to close her eyes and she hears the buzzing of gnats and bees; smells the clover and the honeysuckle. And there are no voices of condemnation, not even her own. There is only the wonder of what may come next...and of peace.

O, the places we find in the world to hold us as we live...as we expand...as we find and nurture and exalt and fall and rise again. They are all around us – a gift from God. They are in our own backyard. They are not far away. They are there when we need them.

Those lovely, wistful places we are drawn to - right at the end of the street.